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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted concerning how Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong refugees between the ages of 15 and 18 have faced the difficulties of adjusting to life in the United States. The study looked at some of the reasons behind the difficulties these youth experience, as well as their success at school, within the family, and in society. Among the conclusions drawn was the prediction that the future would be bright for most refugee youth. Concerns, however, were raised about a significant minority of at-risk youth whose failures have been obscured by the achievements of their more successful peers. Topics highlighted in this newsletter issue include: "Study Documents Success and Problems" and "The 1.5 Generation." (GLR)

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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: REFUGEE YOUTH

Donald A. Ranard

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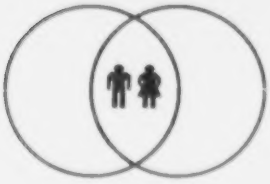

Between Two Worlds: Refugee Youth

by Donald A. Ranard

Refugees between the ages of 15 and 18 face a unique array of difficulties in the U.S. This issue of In America *examines how Vietnamese, Lao, Cambodian, and Hmong youth have adjusted to their new country, and looks at some of the reasons behind their problems as well as their successes at school, within their families, and in society.*

Study Documents Success and Problems

"Despite their many handicaps and in a remarkably short period of time, refugee youth have been able to make exceptional progress in American schools. . . ."

This is the conclusion of a recent study, *The Adaptation of Southeast Asian Refugee Youth*, by Rubén G. Rumbaut and Kenji Ima, sociologists at San Diego State University.

Funded by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR), the study examined the achievements, aspirations, and problems of Indochinese secondary school students in San Diego. It predicts a bright future for most refugee youth, but raises concerns about a significant minority of "at-risk" youth whose failures have been obscured by the achievements of their more successful peers.

Academic achievements

The study found that, except for a small number of East Asian groups, Indochinese students as a whole had higher grade point averages than all other ethnic groups, including white majority students.[1]

Their scores on standardized achievement tests were well above national norms in math, at about the average level in language mechanics and spelling, below the average in writing, and well below the national average in reading comprehension.

The study revealed significant differences in educational achievement among the Indochinese groups. The first-ranking Vietnamese had a greater proportion of honor students and students with grade point averages (GPAs) above 3.0 than all other student groups. Almost one-half of the Vietnamese students ranked in the top 10% in math skills. The Vietnamese were followed in academic achievement by the Vietnamese-Chinese, the Hmong, the Cambodians, and the Lao.

Perhaps the study's most unexpected finding was the third-place rank of the Hmong students, who outperformed not only the Cambodians and the Lao, but almost all American-born groups, as well, including white majority students. The performance of the Hmong students was surprising, given the generally accepted link between children's performance in school and their parents' level of income

[1] In fact, the data showed that all immigrants and refugee groups—whether from Asia, Europe, or Latin America—were doing better than native-born American students, "despite initial (or even persisting) English language handicaps."

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and education. Hmong parents have one of the highest rates of unemployment and lowest levels of education in San Diego.

The performances of the Cambodians and Lao were also surprising: The Lao ranked last among Indochinese students, even though their parents had more education than Hmong parents and considerably higher rates of employment than both Cambodian and Hmong parents. The Cambodians averaged higher GPAs than American-born students, "despite the prevalence of emotional trauma in their community."

Cultural values linked to academic performance

Although parents' levels of education and income made a difference in how their children did in school, it was not the main factor, the study found. More important was the extent to which "cultural resources"—cultural values, attitudes, and coping strategies—helped or hindered the process of adaptation. The study attributed the superior achievements of the Vietnamese, Chinese, and Hmong to a combination of cultural resources which "work particularly well within the competitive American educational . . . system."[2] These resources include:

- a strong belief in the value of education, self-discipline, and hard work,
- a respect for the authority of parents and teachers,
- a strong sense of obligation between parent and child, in particular "the expectation of tremendous parental self-sacrifice to ensure . . . that the children will go as far as possible in pursuit of their education," and
- the ability of families to find collective solutions to problems—the tendency, for example, of Vietnamese families to function as "mini-school systems, with older siblings serving as tutors to the younger ones and learning better themselves in the process of teaching."

In contrast to the Vietnamese, Chinese, and the Hmong, the Lao and Cambodians are described in the study as generally less competitive, more concerned with recreational activities, and more fatalistic—more likely to believe, for example, that success is a result of luck and merit earned from past lives, rather than hard work. In addition, Lao and Cambodians, who tend to be more individualistic, were less likely to find collective solutions to problems. In Lao and Cambodian parent-child relationships, the study found "looser social controls, less discipline (including less parental push and pressure to achieve) . . . and a weaker sense of obligation to parents. . . ."

Different ethnic groups face different problems

While most Indochinese refugees were doing well, a significant and often overlooked minority were experiencing serious problems adjusting to American schools, the study found.

The kinds of problems that Indochinese youth experience differed by ethnic group. Among Indochinese students, the Vietnamese and the Lao were more likely to get into trouble at school, the Cambodians had the highest dropout rate, and the Hmong had the most difficulty in making the transition from high school to college. The Vietnamese and Lao were also more likely to get into trouble with the law. (See "Youth in Trouble," facing page.)

The study found that Vietnamese and Lao students were more likely than the Cambodians or the Hmong to be suspended from school. While the data showed that Vietnamese and Lao students were less likely than whites, blacks, or Hispanics to be suspended, they also indicated that suspensions for the Vietnamese and Lao had increased more rapidly than for any other group in San Diego.

Quoting from a San Diego County Schools

[2]This analysis parallels a finding from a 1985 University of Michigan study by Caplan, Whitmore, Bui, and Trautman examining the academic achievements of Indochinese students, mostly children of the post-1978 Vietnamese and Chinese-Vietnamese "boat people." The study found that although "much of the past literature . . . has emphasized that successful resettlement comes about because refugees adopt the ways of their nonrefugee neighbors," the Indochinese students "appear to have gotten along as well as they have because of what they have brought with them—in particular, their traditional cultural values, which are perceived as quite different from those attributed to their nonrefugee neighbors."

Youth in Trouble

The San Diego study analyzed data from an ongoing study of Indochinese delinquents being conducted by Kenji Ima, sociologist, and Jeanne Nidorf, psychologist. A profile of delinquent refugee youth emerged:

- **Vietnamese and Lao youth are more likely to get into trouble with the law than Hmong or Cambodians.**
- **Delinquent refugees have a much lower level of English proficiency than their non-delinquent counterparts. Of those delinquent refugees who were given a language rating, only 7% had a good command of English and more than half needed translators. Among the serious offenders, none had a good command of English.**
- **Most have had school troubles, with the Vietnamese most likely to show a connection between school troubles and delinquency. Because their culture places such a high value on education, Vietnamese youth are more sensitive to failure and thus more likely to respond destructively to it.**
- **Delinquent refugee youth are more likely than whites and other minorities to live without one or both natural parents and much more likely to have unemployed fathers. Of 64 guardians whose language ability was assessed, 75% needed translators.**
- **Refugee youth are more likely than white or other minority students to be associated with gangs. The study notes "a striking 'compulsion' [among refugee youth] to associate with peers beyond what one expects of other youths."**
- **Refugee youth gangs lack the formal structure of gangs formed by other minority youth: there are, for example, no formal names, territory, or clothing markers. In contrast to white and minority gangs, which are "much more localized and territorial," refugee youth gang members often live together, wandering from town to town, living in motels. As a result, they are much more difficult to monitor and control than other gangs.**
- **For the most part, refugee delinquents are involved in minor crimes. They are more likely than other minority youth to commit property crimes rather than crimes against persons. They are less likely to get involved in crime for "kicks" and more likely to be motivated by financial gain. More interested in acquiring things than in destroying them, they are unlikely to get involved in vandalism.**
- **Delinquent refugee youth are more likely than white and other minority delinquents to respect authority. Police officers rated 65% of the delinquent refugees as having "good attitudes" toward authority, compared to only 45% of white delinquents and 35% of other minority delinquents. However, the study predicts that "respect and deference for authority is likely to decrease if the youth acculturates to American standards, especially within juvenile incarceration units, where they are likely to learn American anti-authority attitudes."**

Counseling and the Vietnamese Student

"Vietnamese are used to seeking help from only family members, and to a degree and scope that the professional helper cannot provide. First, the authority figure of the family counsels family members in every aspect of life; secondly, assistance includes economic and material help; thirdly, there is no specific time allocated for this counseling, any time of the day will be appropriate; and fourthly, there are no individual limits drawn in terms of the intimacy and the personal space between the head of the family and the member of the family who is seeking advice.

This creates a dilemma for the counselor who is advising immigrants in the U.S. If the counselor is successful, in the sense that the Vietnamese will treat him or her as a member of the family, then the counselor has to be open to be called any time of the day, asked for any type of help, and be expected to be personally involved in the situation. These are very unrealistic expectations from an American counselor. . . . [Vietnamese] students will expect a more personal involvement, and usually will end up feeling alienated because they feel they are being treated as a 'client,' rather than 'a special person.' "

***—From A Report on Needs Assessment of Vietnamese Students at California State University, Fullerton,* by Robert B. Robinson & Degan M. Cocchiaro, 1987**

report, the study attributed the increase in school suspensions among Indochinese students to "increasing prejudice towards all Asians, particularly the Indochinese" as well as "increased physical retaliation by Indochinese students in response to verbal and physical abuse from other students."

According to the study, Vietnamese and Lao youth had higher rates of suspension because they were more likely than the Hmong or Cambodians to respond to racial baiting.

"Some Vietnamese students . . . told us that they will not respond at the first insult from an American student, would take notice of a second insult from the same provocateur, and will 'blow up' and get into a fight in response to a third or subsequent provocation," the study reports.

One reason that confrontations between Vietnamese and American-born students often escalate to violence is that the two groups view conflict very differently. "Vietnamese culture treats conflict seriously and not as a casual affair—which is the way Americans view such confrontations," the study notes.

The Hmong, who had the one of the lowest suspension rates in the city, were less likely to respond to provocation. Unlike the Vietnamese and the Lao, who in their own countries were members of the ethnic majority, the Hmong seem to have developed strategies for coping with racism from their experiences as a subordinated minority in Laos.

While the Cambodians also had a low school suspension rate, they had one of the highest dropout rates in the city. The study relates this latter finding to a cultural tendency among Cambodians to withdraw from conflict—a characteristic that also explains their low suspension rate—as well as to the effects of the Pol Pot era.

The study documents the devastating effect that the Pol Pot era has had on both the physical and psychological stability of Cambodian families. Approximately 50% of Cambodian families in the study sample consisted of single-parent female households, and nearly 25% of Cambodian women were widows.

The Cambodians who had lived through the

Pol Pot period—all but two of the respondents in the study—continued to suffer physically and emotionally: "[They] all mentioned their frequent nightmares, their inability to forget those terrible days, their breaking into a cold sweat whenever they hear unfamiliar sounds which trigger thoughts of those traumatic days." According to a Cambodian service provider interviewed in the study, many Cambodian parents suffer "post-traumatic stress" so severe that they are unable to take care of their children, which in turn affects their children's school performance and increases the likelihood of their dropping out of school.[3]

Although the Hmong were found to have the lowest dropout rate in the city, they were among those least likely to continue their education beyond high school. One reason is economic. As members of one of the poorest groups in San Diego, where 94% of the Hmong live below the poverty level, Hmong parents are less able to support their children's education beyond high school. For refugee families on welfare—a majority of Hmong families in San Diego—the loss of a child's benefits at 18 further increases pressure for the child to get a job in order to contribute to family income.

In addition, low levels of education and high rates of unemployment in the San Diego Hmong community mean that Hmong adults are less able to inform their children about educational and employment options after high school. This fact, coupled with an apparent reluctance among the Hmong to turn to "outsiders" for help, hinders their capacity to make clear and realistic plans for their future.

But early marriage emerges as the biggest obstacle to post-secondary education for the Hmong, especially among girls, for whom marriage seems to be a response to traditional pressures from parents and boyfriends as well as a means of escape from unhappy home lives. ⊠

[3]The psychological well-being of mothers is an important factor in the educational performance of their children, the study found, pointing to "the key role of Southeast Asian mothers in the socialization, supervision, and education of their children."

Struggling to Catch Up

Recent research documents what many educators have been saying for several years: A lack of previous education is a major obstacle to success in high school for many refugee youth—particularly those who arrive in the U.S. as teenagers and thus have less time than younger arrivals to catch up. "They withdraw from what seems to them an impossible task of simultaneously learning high school material while learning English," the San Diego study notes. "This is all the more difficult for older students who [are] illiterate in their own native language."

ORR-funded studies of refugee youth in Philadelphia and Minneapolis/St. Paul corroborate the San Diego finding. Less educated youth are "very likely to do relatively poorly in school and hence, are likely to be at the lower end of the occupational ladder," the Minneapolis/St. Paul study noted.

One obstacle that this group faces is that their needs have not been publicized. "All we hear about are the valedictorians and the gang members," said a participant at a recent ORR-sponsored conference, Replanting Uprooted Refugee Youth. "A lot of kids are just quietly falling through the cracks."

Nevertheless, educators around the U.S. are increasingly aware that these less-educated students need more than just a few hours of ESL a day if they are to enter the academic mainstream. Rather, they need an entire school curriculum adapted to their levels of language and background knowledge—much like what the Preparation for American Secondary Schools (PASS) program provides. At the conference on refugee youth, for example, service providers from Philadelphia identified "appropriate curriculum for limited English proficient speakers" as one of that school system's most pressing needs.

The "1.5 Generation"

"AT WORK I'm American, but at home I'm Cambodian," says Naroeun, a computer programmer in Arlington, Virginia. At work the outgoing 21-year-old college graduate speaks her mind, arguing a point, if necessary. Sometimes she enjoys a drink with colleagues after work, even though she knows her parents wouldn't approve.

. . . they live in two worlds with two sets of languages, rules, and customs . . .

But at home, Naroeun is a quiet, obedient daughter, especially in the presence of her father. "He's pretty conservative," she says, "and sometimes I don't agree with him, but I always say, 'Yes, yes, yes.' " Naroeun avoids conflict between her two worlds by keeping them separate. "I never invite my American friends home," she says.

Naroeun, who arrived in the U.S. at 16, is a member of what the San Diego study calls the "1.5 generation." Part of neither the first generation of their parents nor of the second generation of children born in the U.S., they occupy a place somewhere between the two. As a bridge between two cultures, they live in two worlds with two sets of languages, rules, and customs, a position that demands considerable tolerance for ambiguity and contradiction. And the challenge of bridging two cultures is complicated by a second challenge—making the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In contrast, their parents face only the first challenge, and the younger generation will have to contend mostly with the second.

But the 1.5 generation also enjoy a special advantage. They are in a better position than their parents to take advantage of opportunities in the new world, and in a better position than

their American-born brothers and sisters to choose what is best from the old.

Van, a medical student at the University of California and a subject in the San Diego study, attributes his success to the Vietnamese work ethic. He is also traditionally Vietnamese in his attitudes toward dating, marriage, and family, he says. But when it comes to his ideas about professional work, Van describes himself as more American than Vietnamese. "Vietnamese tend to be a little more relaxed about working," he says. "Hard work in school is Vietnamese, but I think once you get out of the school system, Vietnamese are more relaxed in terms of working." He also sees himself as American in his punctuality. "I like to be right on time," he says. "Most of Vietnamese, they tend to stress 'rubber-band time.' "

Van, who arrived in the U.S. at 15, has succeeded despite barriers of language and culture—barriers that his younger brothers and sisters don't face. Yet they seem to lack their older brother's single-minded determination to succeed.

"The younger ones see the easy life in America," says Van. "They don't know the value of money. They didn't have to go through the time that they starve to death and hungry and didn't have money." They even have "American" study habits, he says with dismay: They wait until the night before an exam to study and then study on their beds while listening to music—"instead of like [me], study for like a week in advance."

"I thought that they would do much better since they have no problem with English," Van says. "But it turn out that they use that to just relax and study the night before the exam." ◙

Friendship: The Cultural Factor

In a recent study, *A Report on Needs Assessment of Vietnamese Students at California State University, Fullerton,* 90% of the Vietnamese respondents agreed with the statement, "Vietnamese students do their best to establish friendly relationships with American students on this campus." This response surprised researchers Robert Bricksen and Dogan Cucelogu, given "the prevalent impression among American students and staff on campus that the Vietnamese show little interest in forming friendships with Americans."

One reason for the discrepancy may lie in the different ways the two groups view friendship, the study speculates. Vietnamese friends tend to get involved in every aspect of each other's lives—a level of involvement that most Americans don't want. Because of the commitment involved, Vietnamese are more cautious than Americans in starting friendships.

According to the study, Americans and Vietnamese are also different in how they "express friendly intentions." Americans are more explicit and direct in expressing their intentions than the Vietnamese and are thus unlikely to get the message when a Vietnamese smiles shyly or chooses to sit close to an American in the library. "The Vietnamese believe that by making themselves available for an interaction in the classroom, laboratory, or library, they have clearly expressed their intention of establishing friendly relationships," the study notes. The Vietnamese students also feel that since they are not in their own country, it is up to American-born students to make the first move. "Otherwise, the Vietnamese would be imposing themselves on the American."

Sources and Suggested Additional Reading

The articles in this issue of In America *are based on interviews with service providers and refugees as well as the following publications:*

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Selected list of recent publications on refugee youth for additional reading

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In America

Perspectives on Refugee Resettlement

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